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Sara Dickey

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# PART I

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# 1

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## Introduction

In the city of Madurai, cinema is everywhere. Glittering billboards advertise the latest films, and smaller posters are slapped on to spare inches of wall space. Movie songs blare from horn speakers and cassette players at weddings, puberty rites, and temple and shrine festivals. Tapes of movie dialogues play at coffee stalls, while patrons join in reciting them. Rickshaws and shop boards are painted with movie stars' pictures. Young men and women follow dress and hairstyle fashions dictated by the latest films. Younger children trade movie star cards, learn to disco dance like the film actors, and recreate heroic battles in imitation of their favorite stars. Fan club members meet in the streets to boast about their star and make fun of his rivals.

The visual and aural presence of cinema in this part of South India (see map for location of Madurai) is matched by one of the highest production and filmwatching rates in the world. India regularly produces more films than any other country (see Dharap 1985: 626; Thomas 1985: 116), and of the three major centers for film production within India, the southern industry in Madras is the largest in terms of number of studios, capital investment, gross income, and number of people engaged in production. It was reported in 1975 that one fourth of all India's cinema houses are in the state of Tamil Nadu (Hardgrave and Neidhart 1975: 27); by 1990, when Tamil Nadu had 2,431 cinema theaters, this proportion still held.<sup>1</sup> More than 85 percent of the adults I questioned went to the movies at least three or four times a month. The state's last five Chief Ministers have been movie actors or filmmakers, some of them swept to power by their fan clubs.<sup>2</sup> The sheer quantity of all this cinematic activity suggests that film has something significant to do with the lives in Tamils in South India.

What is the appeal of Tamil cinema? Why is it important to its urban

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Map of India and Sri Lanka.

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viewers?<sup>3</sup> What do they gain from frequent attendance? And how do viewers and filmmakers together negotiate the content and meaning of cinema? The answers to these questions will reveal the significance that cinema holds for its viewers and the meanings these viewers make of what they see.

To look at meaning-making in cinema as a process of negotiation requires attention to the different participants, activities, and texts of cinema. Because my interest lies particularly in what the audiences make of the medium, the focus of this study falls primarily on viewers. This audience-centered analysis contrasts with most previous critiques of Tamil and other Indian film, which tend to dismiss popular cinema as mindless, immoral, and divorced from reality.<sup>4</sup> Rosie Thomas, one of the few English-language writers to analyze mainstream Indian cinema in terms of its own canons, has noted that typical western reactions vary from “impertinent criticism” based on western filmmaking conventions to patronizing congratulations for quaint achievements (1985: 117–18). Indian critics often reveal a similar lack of understanding; Thomas quotes a common complaint by journalists that “all that the films stand for is exotica, vulgarity and absurdity” (1985: 119). Indian as well as foreign critics frequently make unfavorable comparisons between Indian popular films and “art” or “parallel” cinema, which generally follows the canons of European art cinema. Chidananda Das Gupta, one of the most thoughtful critics of Indian film, denies that popular filmmakers take a “serious approach to cinema” (1981: 102).<sup>5</sup>

If most critics pass judgment on popular movies from high-culture perspectives and refuse to examine the films on their own terms, they betray a similar resistance to viewing the audience’s interest in films as anything more than titillation or mindless fantasy. The notion that popular cinema could hold meaning for its audiences or provide insight into their lives is, as Pradip Krishen (1981: 4) points out, greeted with disdain. Even as thoughtful an analyst as the anthropologist Beatrix Pfeleiderer has claimed that the world presented on screen is “incomprehensible ... not related to the spectators’ desires and needs,” a “remote reality” at best (1985: 108). What is missing from these perspectives is not only serious engagement with popular cinema, but also attention to the opinions of those others who take these films seriously – the everyday audiences. In fact cinema is deeply connected to some of the most poignant concerns of viewers’ lives and, far from being divorced from those lives, influences their everyday conduct.

This is not to say that moral or aesthetic criticism of a negative kind is

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limited to formal critics; popular opinion in Tamil Nadu can be equally pejorative. When I first went to Madurai, I believed that cinema's popularity would make it easy to get people to talk about films and filmgoing. It quickly became apparent, however, that for all its popularity cinema does not enjoy unequivocal support, even among its most frequent viewers. Many say it undermines traditional values, and even those who go most often and praise favorite stars most vociferously among friends may not admit their passion to others for fear of social censure. Viewers praise actors and actresses one moment and malign their morals the next. Filmmakers who have made fortunes from audiences disparage viewers' prurient tastes.

Many of popular cinema's critics denounce it as a purely escapist form of mass entertainment. Much of Tamil cinema's negative reputation does indeed derive from its association with the masses (i.e. the urban and rural poor), who make up the overwhelming majority of viewers.<sup>6</sup> Lower class people themselves generally share this view of cinema, but attend films regularly despite it. Their enthusiasm for cinema has also had effects away from the box office, playing a significant role, for example, in the rise to power of the parties that have dominated state politics since the 1960s, led by stars of the "cine world" whose films deftly appealed to the hopes and frustrations of the poor.

Filmmakers and audiences belong, by and large, to groups or categories that I will argue can be considered distinct classes. When I began my research I knew that movies were patronized mostly by the poor, and was aware that consumers and producers might be distinguished by social and economic criteria, but did not particularly intend to carry out a class-oriented analysis. I have been insistently drawn to this perspective, however, by Tamils' own intentional and unintentional portrayal of various aspects of cinema as somehow marked by class associations. Filmgoing is seen – and disparaged – by all elements of the public as a largely lower class preoccupation; filmmaking is done by people who belong almost exclusively to the middle and upper classes. This is not to say that cinema participants are entirely restricted by socioeconomic status to specific roles; members of the middle and upper classes go to the theaters and watch movies on their VCRs, and the poor have some influence on the form and content of films. Nonetheless, the common image of cinema participation, accepted and promulgated at all social levels, is one of the poor watching and even demanding the unsavory, low-brow material of films. The generally unstated complement to this picture is the provision by middle and upper class filmmakers of this

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devalued material. Class, it is clear, plays an important role not only in influencing public perception of cinema, but also in the reception and creation of the movies.

Much of the meaning derived from cinema has to do with the socially, culturally, and economically subordinate position of the urban poor, and issues of class, power, and dominance are central to understanding the relationship of viewers to the medium. Class is essential to urban residents' identity; when Madurai residents talk about "people like us," they are much more likely to be identifying themselves with a socioeconomic category such as "poor people" than with forms of identity that have historically received more frequent consideration by analysts, such as caste or religion. As other observers have noted (e.g. L. Caplan 1987: 10; Holmström 1984: 282ff; Driver and Driver 1987; Omvedt 1989), social class and caste comprise separate but interacting forms of hierarchy. Class often proves the more effective frame of reference for determining hierarchically based behavior in South Indian cities, because it is more easily observed by both strangers and acquaintances than is caste identity.

The people I refer to as the "urban poor" in this work include skilled and unskilled laborers or low-level office workers, and their household members, who possess or control little in the way of land and other property and endure a general lack of economic security. Those I spoke

1. An autorickshaw driver and his auto decorated with a Vijaykanth decal. 1991.



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with who had paid occupations worked, for example, as rickshaw drivers, construction workers, domestic servants, office “peons,” flower and vegetable sellers, small shopkeepers, municipally employed street and latrine cleaners, leatherworkers, shop clerks, woodworkers, bicycle and motorbike repairmen, Brahman and non-Brahman small-temple priests. They worked in both the organized and unorganized sectors, public and private, and a few were members of unions; very few, however, worked in factories. Almost all had incomes at or near the Indian poverty line.<sup>7</sup> All were by their own standards clearly poor and financially insecure, although some were on the verge of attaining greater security, thanks to job promotions or the addition of a new wage-earner to the family. Economic security could also fluctuate downward – jobs could disappear, or a wage-earner be lost to the family when a child married; thus financial security was linked both to the larger economy and to stages in the domestic cycle. It is important to note that at the time of this fieldwork I did not get to know many of the poorest poor, people who in Madurai live in insubstantial shelters, usually on the banks of canals and rivers or on the sidewalks and streets. Nothing I observed then or thereafter, however, has led me to believe that their reactions to cinema would have differed significantly from those of other urban poor residents.

The preceding description suggests, rightly, that the category “urban poor” includes people who vary widely in such features as occupation and income. The term is nonetheless a useful one for a number of reasons. First, it corresponds to the category of people that Tamils lump at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy, and to the self-ascribed identity of people in this position. Such people refer to themselves as “poor people,” *eezhai makkaḷ* (or “laborers,” *tozhilaalikaḷ*; “people who suffer,” *kashṭappaṭṭavarkaḷ*; or “people who have nothing,” *illaatavarkaḷ*), and are referred to as “the lower class” or “the mass” (usually in English) by members of higher classes.<sup>8</sup>

The poor lump all more privileged people together as “rich people,” *paṇakkaararkaḷ*, or “big people,” *periyavarkaḷ*, using essentially the same socioeconomic criteria as I have. These wealthier people, on the other hand, tend to identify themselves (in English) as “middle class” or “upper class” people. While there are indeed differences between those who identify themselves as middle or upper class in terms of lifestyle and values, in this work I adhere to the model cited by the poor in considering the relatively wealthy in largely undifferentiated opposition to the poor because they share significant attributes for the purpose of this analysis. Both the middle and the upper classes can be distinguished from the poor

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by their awareness and expectation of personal opportunities in education and employment, a sense of hope and potential much unlike the resignation expressed by the urban poor – who are often struggling to maintain a grasp on what they have rather than expecting or achieving improvement. Both hold a common view of the poor as short-sighted, narrow-minded, and often morally misguided. Members of both higher classes tend to receive substantial education (at least through secondary school) and share values that become significant in the analysis of film-goers' reactions to their own position in the socioeconomic hierarchy and of the role those reactions play in responses to cinema.

Second, I have avoided imposing a more precise class label, such as the classical Marxist terms familiar to students of western capitalist societies, because the application of these categories in India is fraught with difficulties. These difficulties derive from variations in social and economic structures. Marxist categories rarely correspond to the most meaningful local divisions in India, even when such criteria as the mode of and relations to means of production are taken into account. As Lionel Caplan argues,

Students of Western societies are, even now, not in agreement on the criteria for identifying the major protagonists in late capitalist formations. How much more complex, then, are these questions where such systems are comparatively new and shaped by a range of quite special historical conditions. (1987: 10; see also Beteille 1974: 43, 117–19 and Kohli 1987: 237n)

Even where a relatively precise class can be identified, as in Holmström's study of the working class in Bangalore, the people it encompasses are hardly uniform in type or security of work, values, lifestyle, or identity (Holmström 1984). Moreover, little organized class consciousness or collective action is found among those who might otherwise technically be identified as members of a single class (Kohli 1987: 150, 240; Beteille 1974: 52; Sharma 1987: 11–12; L. Caplan 1987: 164). Compounding this difficulty of fit is the paucity of detailed and empirically based studies of the meanings and boundaries of class divisions in India. Most of the small but growing number of works have focussed on agrarian systems (Thorner 1956; Beteille 1974; Sharma 1978; Gough 1981; Omvedt 1989);<sup>9</sup> many of them emphasize indigenous categories rather than applying strict Marxist, Weberian or other forms.

All of these obstacles, it should be noted, apply to dominant as well as subordinate classes. It has been argued that no single dominant class can be identified in India, due to the fragmentation or pluralism of elite groups (Kohli 1987: 241; see Lele 1981), and to the divergence of the lines



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of their formation from those of dominant class formations in western capitalist societies. Kohli, for example, contends that there is rarely a single dominant class in India “capable of imposing hegemonic rule in the Gramscian sense” (ibid.), and Caplan points out that in urban areas, “ownership of the means of production resides principally with the state or multinational corporations, so that the indigenous capitalist class is only a tiny, highly compact, and barely visible minority” (L. Caplan 1987: 13–14). (See Ganguli 1977: 29 for a contrasting point of view.) Nor do most analysts believe that elites collectively possess a unified dominant ideology.

Should we avoid any reference to class under such circumstances? I would argue not. In particular, attempts to invalidate the “applicability of class analysis” to India based on a lack of class consciousness threaten, as Beteille has pointed out, to “define classes out of existence” (1974: 52). Even without an organized form of consciousness there is certainly, as others have noted among residents of Madras (Wiebe 1981; P. Caplan 1985; L. Caplan 1987: 147), an *awareness* of class. I suggest, following Lloyd (1982: 40), that this awareness constitutes a minimal level of class consciousness. Categories of class constitute a form of hierarchy that is consciously recognized, cognitively salient, experientially real, and behaviorally motivating (and, incidentally, remains distinguished from caste). I will also argue that to the extent we can speak of the existence of classes, we can also speak of the existence of class ideologies, a collection of beliefs and values conditioned by perceptions of experience, hierarchical position, and relationship to other categories in the hierarchy.

Thus I have chosen the phrase “urban poor” because it corresponds to the most prominent local subdivision of people made on a socioeconomic basis, while terms such as “working class” or “proletariat” would not; it is also more descriptive and precisely defined than the usually vague “lower class” (a term that will occasionally be used in this work – especially when it is appropriate to the indigenous context, e.g. where judgments are made about the value of “lower” and “higher” class aesthetics – as a synonym for the poor). It refers to a category of people who in some minimal ways, I argue, can be considered a class. The final reason for defining the people who form the primary focus of this book as I have is that, despite the term’s broadness, it remains a useful category of analysis. Those whom I describe and who would describe themselves in this way share the features mentioned above, most notably poverty, a persistent sense of financial insecurity, and lack of sociopolitical power. Few if any meaningful class-related subdivisions could be made, aside perhaps from occupation,

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and the resulting groups would be too small and numerous to be of use here; moreover the shared identity based on insecurity creates a sense of commonality that is often stronger than the sense of identity shared with members of smaller categories or groups (cf. Sharma 1978: 167).

Thus, this study is a class-based analysis to the extent that filmgoers and filmmakers (and others like them) perceive and portray themselves as distinct from (and, more than incidentally, in opposition to) one another, based on economic, social, cultural, and political factors. Such an approach to class, while necessarily divested of the specificity gained from a stricter definition, provides other advantages by making sociocultural factors as fundamental as economic and political ones. As Lionel Caplan has pointed out, such a model

takes us away from the static and sterile notion of class as an occupational or income category, or even a set of people standing in a particular relation to the means of production. It invites us, rather, to regard class as a cultural as well as an economic formation. This enables us to treat class struggle as being every bit as much about definitive meaning systems or appropriate religious views and observances as about material means, scarce jobs, or the control of property. (1987:14)

In the approach taken here, then, opposition between classes has equally to do with values and aesthetics as with economic inequalities and relationships.

Class identity bears strongly on viewers' participation in Tamil cinema, and issues of class, elite cultures, and subordinate cultures are highly significant in understanding the relationship between film producers and consumers. This configuration is of course not limited to southern India, and the last decade has produced a growing scholarly awareness of the subcultural aspects of expressive forms in various societies. Much of this work has occurred in reaction to the position of the Frankfurt School, which extolled the enlightening aspects of high art or culture while deploring mass culture as an instrument of capitalist hegemony that created false needs and desires (cf. Adorno 1941; Horkheimer 1941). Implicit (at least) in this perspective is the assumption that mass culture is molded by the dominant ideology of a society and that its consumers absorb this ideology obediently and straightforwardly. Many Indian film critics have their ideological precursors in these views.

Much of the recent work questioning the monolithic nature of culture and mass media can be traced back to Raymond Williams (1977, 1982). Combining theory with ethnography, Williams and his colleagues began in the 1970s to investigate the potential for the expression of subaltern resistance within mass and popular culture. The first phase of this